

The evacuation of the troops and materiel began at dawn on 5 August, a Dakota landing every 6 minutes without stop.

Hebert knew Na San perfectly, since he had passed close to 5 months there, from January to June 1953. He had the most important pillboxes evacuated by the regular battalions, plus certain support points occupied by Ansidei's fighters, from the Aiglon underground. He himself installed a command post for the Commander of the entrenched camp to follow the operations. Meanwhile 600 of Sergeant Callot's partisans, assisted by Ansidei, occupied the mountainous plateau 4 kilometers south of Na San. This was a magnificently successful operation for the underground fighters, the 4 non-commissioned officers who commanded them and Captain Hebert. The evacuation continued for 4 days.

Major Fournier had come on the last airplane to congratulate Captain Hebert and his non-commissioned officers who had protected the airstrip and had guaranteed perfect security for this evacuation. Some light troops had left on RC 6 in the direction of Yen Chau, 40 kilometers southeast of Na San. They reported that the 1st element of the 312th Viet Division was making a forced march in the direction of Na San to try to cover the last elements in the camp. But ambushes and mines slowed their progress. Hebert was not worried at all. They would arrive too late.

However, it is interesting to know how Colonel Jules Roy, my old classmate, recounts these missions. If you have his book, "La Bataille de Dien Bien Phu" (The Battle of Dien Bien Phu), you will find his explanations at the bottom of page 35; they are worth quoting:

"The absence of reaction on the part of the Viet Minh was due to a minor incident which assumed major proportions: the broadcasting set of the enemy observation post broke down. Once it had been repaired, the radio transmitted the messages as they had piled up, backwards with respect to time. When the commander

was informed of the importance of this news, it was too late to act. Was the downpour of congratulations for the generals from the pilots the next day due to the stupidity of a soldier who broadcast backwards? Ten years later when I asked General Giap this question, he smiled and answered:

"One of our principal strategies consists in trying to keep the initiative. Navarre spoke a great deal about keeping his. The troops who were besieging Ha San were not very numerous, and the kind did not coincide with our major operations. We thought that if Navarre removed his garrison from Ha San, well they would set up for us.

"For me this optimism seemed to conceal a certain amount of spite."

I had given Hebert the order to reenter Hanoi with Major Fournier so that he could again take over this assembly of underground fighters after the disruptions brought by the evacuation. After having the most important pillboxes blown up, and while a detachment of partisans under the orders of Senior Sergeant Chatel presented arms, Hebert left in the last airplane with Colonel Guillichine and Major Fournier. For it seemed obvious to me that the Viets would not delay in reacting violently against our fighters.

Without exception the press treated the evacuation of Ha San as an inexplicable success, and unprecedented exploit. But the role played by Hebert and his non-commissioned officers was never mentioned in the reports. This was a specific prohibition of the Paris SDECE, which wanted all of the GCMV operations to remain secret. They were certainly secret for the French Army, but not for the Viets, who put into operation enormous methods to crush our underground fighters.

In his book Jules Roy mentions the underground fighters 11 times. But he never had the curiosity to find out what they represented, as if this would have annoyed him. It was undoubtedly painful for him to acknowledge that all of the Indochina

mountaineers refused to submit to the communists. An underground is a people who rise against an invader to defend their lifestyle and their freedom.

Could Jules Roy not know this?

The recovery of the European staff from Phong Saly was conducted without any problems. They left the city without arousing the attention of the Viets. The native soldiers remained at the disposal of Captain Mourier and Lieutenant Richard, responsible for the Lang Sue underground.

The prohibitions placed on Captain Mourier were as follows: In case the Viets tried to occupy the cities, he was not to join battle but to evacuate. Then he was to harass the outer edges of the enemy by setting up many ambushes along the highway to interrupt communication and obstruct supplies.

The Viets occupied the city twice. They also had to evacuate it twice. The situation within the city in the midst of a completely hostile population and the difficulty with supplies rendered their life impossible.

In a few months the province of Phong Saly and the province of Sam Neau were entirely back under our control.

The main difficulty in September 1953 remained the evacuation of Lai Chau. We saw that the topographic and strategic situation in the capital of the Thai country posed serious problems. In the case of a serious attack by Viet Divisions it would be indefensible, and it was necessary to recover its troops to continue the execution of the Navarre plan.

Certainly the evacuation of Ma San, which had appeared difficult, and that of Phong Saly had gone well. However, the fact still remained that the evacuation of an important post opposite a vigilant observer constituted serious risks for the Lai Chau garrison.

The tragic evacuation of Cao Bang in October 1950 was still in everyone's memory. Without the presence of our underground fighters, the evacuation of Sam Neua would have turned out very badly.

The plan which I had explained to General Navarre and which he had acknowledged was perfectly feasible. This was a matter of reoccupying Dien Bien Phu, evacuating the Lai Chau troops to this post, of reconditioning the airstrip to recover the regular units, and of establishing significant underground organizations in this region.

At this time the Viet Battle Corps, i.e., the 304th, 308th, 312th, 316th, and 320 divisions, had suffered heavy losses at the end of 1952, and particularly at Na San and in the Plaine des Jarres. The divisions were not yet in condition to resume their customary autumn offensive.

Installed in the Longhe plateau between Na San and Dien Bien Phu, our Colibri, Calamar and Aiglon undergrounds systematically continued their extensions. They were going to reach a total of 4,000 underground fighters. Thanks to the Training Centers, their command was definitely improving. They blockaded more than 20 kilometers of RP 41, a vital artery for the Viets, and the valley of Song Ma, the highway from Than Hoa to Dien Bien Phu.

In Laos the province of Phong Saly was reoccupied, as was the province of Sam Neua. Underground fighters under the direction of Captain Sassi systematically took position north of Xieng Kouang and of the Plaine des Jarres.

To the east the Cardamone underground, under the direction of Lieutenant Hung, continued its implantation in the direction of Than Uyen.

In the region of Muong Khe, 120 kilometers north of Dien Bien Phu, we had even discovered a Nationalist Chinese Colonel who had occupied the region since 1950, a veritable feudal lord, who placed himself at our disposal.

The year before, anticipating an airborne operation to Dien Bien Phu, we had installed 400 partisans with Captain Chomette, Lieutenant Castagnoni and 4 non-commissioned officers north of the basin. Since the operation had not been carried out, they were expensive to maintain at a time when supplying the air bases of Ha San and of the Plaine des Jarres absorbed almost all of our air potential.

On the other hand the Chomette detachment was not an underground. It was composed of displaced partisans. The majority came from the province of Lai Chau and asked to return home.

The installation of a veritable underground zone in this region was possible, but other bases had to be recaptured. Therefore Chomette turned toward Lai Chau with his entire detachment.

At that moment I had the unfortunate idea of proposing that an honor company be set up for Deo Van Long, the king of the Thai Country on the basis of his best elements. This perfectly equipped company would have been the personal guard and, with the already famous Thai Ballet Corps, would have increased his prestige in the eyes of the many French and foreign personalities who came to visit him.

I asked that the Chomette credits be left to me to establish a real underground zone north of Dien Bien Phu, which was not occupied by the Viet Minh and which was good to put under defense. But I met stubborn opposition from General Cagny and his political advisor for the Thai Country, a person who frequently dressed as a colonel.

Instead of an underground, 24 partisan companies were created and placed under the command of Mr. Bordier, the son-in-law of Deo Van Long. Bordier, an agricultural engineer and a captain in the reserves, had some influence, valuable for us, with Deo Van Long. But he had no material nor the staffing necessary for his troop to be commanded.

Certainly the European non-commissioned officers succeeded in commanding underground troops who reached and often exceeded 1,000 armed men. But the fighters were grouped by villages under the orders of native leaders whom they obeyed blindly. They were static fighters, moving only within the regions which they knew, and always on simple missions. Only small commandos, specially instructed and trained, moved within the undergrounds for precise and brief operations.

To claim to establish such a large number of units, expected to be mobile like regular units, without the minimum staffing was an obvious error, a dream. However these companies were formed.

Certainly these troops, spread out within the terrain of Lai Chau and relatively well equipped with the rudiments of weapons handling, could impress neophytes, but certainly not an experienced military man.

I wrote a long report on this subject to General Cogy to point out to him the weaknesses of such troops and to tell him that, without instructions and without a command staff, it would fall apart at the first serious engagement. I was not understood.

Mr. Bordier made praiseworthy efforts to recover something from this enormous fiasco. He moved about in the peaceful zones to train his companies. But their passage was particularly marked by pilfering which finally made them detested by the people.

In any case this detachment totally escaped the GCMA, because it was at the disposal of the Sector Commander, and because it developed only in the immediate vicinity of Lai Chau. Finally, it was costing too much. With the same credits the GCMA would have been able to maintain 15,000 underground fighters. And we know to what extent this question of credits was one of the major concerns of the GCMA commander.

That is why, when on 20 November the parachutists jumped at Dien Bien Phu, there was no one north of the basin, and why it was later impossible to implant underground fighters there. However, I have always thought that the Dien Bien Phu operation, carried out in September immediately after the evacuation of Na San or at the beginning of October, in the situation which I have just clarified, would have been a rapid operation. It would have permitted us not only to recover all of the Lai Chau troops, but also the 3 parachute battalions when the airstrip had been restored.

I do not know whether General Navarre had been ordered by the French Government to protect Laos at all costs. The Indochinese peninsula constituted only one whole which had to be defended, and particularly Laos, the member of the French Union most loyal to France.

I am still convinced that, if Dien Bien Phu had been taken from the Viets at the right time, we could have transformed all of the High Region of North Laos and of Tonkin into an enormous underground zone including the Lactian frontier. With a Dakota airstrip and its center, that of Dien Bien Phu, the underground in trouble could have been supported by regular troops, which would have been easy to recover after the danger was over. They would have given Laos an enormous cover capable of preventing all deep and lasting infiltration in the direction of Laos.

The Viet army was particularly composed of Annamese from the Delta, whose adaptation to life in the High Region was time-consuming and difficult. They had had no difficulty in occupying it, because they had found it empty. Their political and military organization had been easy to impose on people whom we had abandoned. At this period and for a limited space of time, we thus had the possibilities of reversing the situation in our favor.

We have seen that all of the mountaineers, no matter which race they belonged to, hated the Annamese. In organizing them we made the Viets detested invaders. In supporting them by organized undergrounds and by conditioned regular troops, we would draw, according to an expression dear to Mac, "The water from the Viet fish", who would have had to leave a region necessary for the pursuit of the war.

We came very close to achieving this success. . . .

However General Navarre had rapidly assimilated the Indochinese problems; he had a realistic view of the situation. The plan which he had conceived was excellent and perfectly feasible in view of his means. It failed because it was not applied fast enough by using to the maximum favorable but temporary situations.

His main subordinates, Generals Cogny and Gilles, bear a heavy load of responsibility in this failure. Old Indochina hands, crowned with their recent successes in the field and sure of themselves, they had become very difficult to command.

Still, they were very valuable, but traditionally military men who expected victory from the shock of real fighters on a battle field.

General Gilles was indisputably the conqueror of Na San. Using his reserves admirably and counterattacking at the proper moment to retake the support points, carefully combining his artillery and aviation support to obtain the maximum effects, he had inflicted such severe losses on the Viet divisions that they had to give up the battle.

But the work done by the GCMV did not appear useful to him. It did not interest him. He scarcely tolerated Hebert and the entrenched camp of Na San. However, 6 months later, Hebert had his foot firmly on the Longhe plateau and allowed the secure evacuation of Na San.

Since the role played by the underground fighters had not appeared in any official reports, it was easy not to know about it.

As for General Coffey, who did appear more open and did not limit his assistance to Captain Fowler, his subordinates in keeping the credits of the 24 partisan companies who could not be of any value, instead of relating them to the COMA, shows quite clearly that he had no more than limited confidence in the work undertaken by the undergrounds.

The Raid on Lao Kay

As soon as the implantation of its bases was finished, Cardamone, the underground of the Upper Red River, immediately began activity. Taking advantage of all favorable situations, it had pushed contact and guerrilla activities in all directions. Finally the Viets had retreated leaving the underground fighters in complete control of the Cardamone zone.

However Nung, perfectly informed, knew that the Viets were planning an operation to recapture Phong Tho. It was then decided to concentrate the Viet forces on a tangible and important point far from the zone of their main efforts, which remained the direction of Than Uyen and Nghia Lo.

The chosen point was Lao Kay.

The operation was conducted on 6 to 10 October 1953. On the night of 5-6 October, 600 Long partisans encircled Coc Leu, a city opposite Lao Kay on the left bank of the Red River, and came within attack range.

At dawn on the 6th, the Nung Commando was parachuted south of Coc Leu by three Dakotas. At the end of the morning the city had been taken. The Viets, panicked by this unexpected attack, blew up the Red River bridge themselves, and retreated to Lao Kay. Nung and Long occupied Coc Leu until 6 October

Nung and Long, proud of their success and confident of their fighters, wanted to cross the Red River and march in the direction of Pha Long, their original country, and reestablish contact with the fragments of Cho Quang Lo's troops.

But we did not believe that the preparation on the left bank was sufficient; not wanting to run any risks, we asked them to resume their initial mission, i.e., after occupying Phong Tho, to occupy our second important objective, Than Uyen, evacuated in panic in November 1952.

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The Lao Kay operation slowed down tremendously. General Navarre, in his book, "L'Agonie de l'Indochine" (The Agony of Indochina), speaks of it in these terms:

"In October we carried out a bold airborne operation on Lao Kay with the support of the local underground fighters. Parallel to our purely military activities, we had developed in the Tonkin High Region a policy of creating underground fighters, recruited from the Thai and especially the Meo population, a policy which in a short time had caused the enemy serious worries and had given us control of certain zones."

Once the result was known, I immediately sent my congratulations to Major Fournier, to Nung and to Long, who had perfectly organized this operation.

For my part, I received serious comments from SDECE in Paris with a threat of severe sanctions for not having mounted this operation secretly.

The press in France had spoken of this for a long time. If the secret is to be maintained during the preparation of an operation, it is normal--if successful--that the Command make it known in order to derive the maximum impact for psychological activity. This is what General Cogy's General Staff did at Hanoi, since the release of this feat of arms was in no way due to Major Fournier, nor to me.

It is interesting to compare the operation on Lao Kay with that which took place on Lang Son three months before, and which had had the same repercussions.

Lang Son had required the dropping of three battalions of parachutists supported by a goodly number of fighter planes and bombardiers. This was the maximum manpower which our potential permitted. At the same time a Mobile Group landed at Tien Yen and went up PC 4 with vehicles and tanks to await the paratroopers on the return trip.

The victorious result had been published immediately. Announced was the destruction of the armament and equipment of two Viet divisions. But the results

were very different for those who received the yellow papers.¹

Certainly the Viets had been surprised. They did not have any opportunity to resist the raid. The units used had come back to their point of departure practically without any losses. But, after having recorded the destruction produced by the paratroopers, the Viets realized that it did not exceed 10% of their materiel and armament.

It is always possible to find large stocks of armaments. To destroy them is another matter. It is necessary to have available a good number of technicians, and the French Army had few of them. Here too, the 8th BCCP, trained for this purpose, would have done remarkable work. But it had disappeared.

Once more many more Viets and materiel had been killed and destroyed in the operations report than in the field.

By comparison the Lao Kay operation had mobilized only three Dakotas and four fighters; it had just as great a morale impact. No regular troops had been engaged in it. The ground upon which our underground fighters had moved was definitely conquered, and there was no collection problem.

Actually by the end of October we had recovered Than Uyen, evacuated in haste in November 1952, and this practically without losses.

When the Than Uyen post was occupied by regular troops, they were stationed right in the post and left only rarely, except for the GCMA commands.

When a Dakota landed on the strip, it was not unusual for it to be fired on while flying low over the region in landing maneuvers. When the city was reoccupied, our underground fighters left the post and did not return. The protection of the field was not assured by a few sentinels, whose field of vision was limited,

¹ Deciphering of the Viet telegrams.

but by all of the population who knew exactly where the Viet troops were, if there were still any in the region. It was enough to make radio contact with the leader responsible for Than Uyen to be sure that security was complete. Young people were sent to remove the buffalo which grazed on the grounds.

When Major Fournier invited General Cogy to land at Than Uyen in a Dakota, the latter was scornful. His General Staff strongly advised him not to land, so as not to expose himself uselessly. To remove all doubt Major Fournier jumped with a parachute to the ground from the airplane which was bringing the General. Then, with a 536, he established contact with the airplane to assure them that everything was going well.

The Plateau des Glieres in Indochina

The evacuation of Na San had shown the Viets the importance of the Colibri, Calamar and Aiglon undergrounds. They had not forgotten that the previous year Cho Quang Lo's underground fighters in the Pha Long region had almost made them lose the city of Lao Kay and compromised their autumn offensive. To save the situation, despite the always latent fear of the Chinese, they had had to appeal to a Chinese division, the 307th.

Major Fournier, Hebert and I knew that Viet reaction would be violent. It was necessary to make a rapid study of the means of guarding this, knowing that our underground fighters would not be supported.

This is why I had asked Hebert to come to Hanoi, after the evacuation of Na San, and to study with Fournier the means of reorganizing the underground fighter organization in order to ward off the anticipated attack under the best conditions.

From 7 August on new radios were parachuted, with the personnel necessary to service them, as well as the staffs who had completed the commando course at Hanoi. We asked the fighters to lengthen the airstrips at Morane, the Mucng Ban strip by 60 meters, and the Ban Chiem Phuoc at Thuan Chau by 80 meters, in order to permit the Beaver at the disposal of the GOMA-Tonkin to land. Piloted by Lt. Nicolai, it could carry six passengers, permit small parachute drops and help evacuate wounded.

Transformation work was being actively pursued to convert certain rice fields into landing fields.

For two weeks after the evacuation of Na San, the most complete calm reigned in the region. As in the beautiful days, the people quietly tended to their occupations. But this lull was of short duration. Beginning with the second half of August, regional troops tried to open RP 41, which made it possible for them to turn from Nghia Lo toward the west, Lai Chau, which then appeared to be their objective. The Viets also wanted to free the strips which parallel the Song Ma Valley and to put Thanh Hoa and Dien Bien Phu into communication.

On 20 August a regional battalion coming from Son La got into a pass on RP 41 in the direction of Ban Chiang Phuoc (the territory of Thaun Chau). The heights were held by a hundred partisans. The Viet battalion scattered in disorder and was practically annihilated. Chatel hurried with his reinforcements. The next day early in the morning an 88 battalion of the 316th made an attack and tried to scale the cliffs bordering the highway. It was repulsed with heavy losses and they left about 30 weapons on the ground. But it had been a rough battle. Chatel's partisans fought remarkable well, but suffered about a dozen killed and 15 wounded, ten of them seriously. The next day they would be evacuated to Hanoi by a Beaver.

Chatel pushed reconnaissance on the Black River and reached Muong Pieng without having met any resistance.

The Viets retreated. The resistance of the underground fighters was greater than they had supposed. Until the end of August the fighters repelled all attacks in this way and did not give up a single position. Weapons, ammunition and rations were parachuted to them and the wounded were regularly evacuated.

From then on the Viet Minh began to prepare systematically for an attack by the underground fighters. Since the 88th Regiment of the 316th had failed, gradually the entire 316th Division would be engaged against them.

At the beginning of September a serious threat appeared in the Song Ma Valley, where regular troops were reported as coming from the Than Hoa region. To oppose these Fournier and Hebert reorganized the total arrangement of the underground fighters.

Sergeant-Major Chatel, the oldest and the most dynamic, came back from his former fief and rejoined Sergeant Maljean (the Aiglon underground) at Muong Lam. At his disposal were more than 1,000 armed partisans. Their mission was to obstruct the Song Ma Valley.

Sergeant Schneider, who had succeeded remarkably with the Meos, whose clothing and hairstyle he had adopted, remained in the central region of Cotonh, Pa Lao, Ban Me and Co Pia. He also had 1,000 armed Meos (Calamar).

Sergent-Major Pallot remained at Thuan Chau, with Ansidei, leaving Muong Lam, as his aide (Colibri). He had 1,000 armed partisans, to which were added the 600 partisans installed on the mountainous plateau 4 kilometers south of Na San.

On 25 August Chatel received the Military Medal for extraordinary service. On 3 September, since the strip for the Beaver had been definitely prepared at Muong Lam, Major Fournier and Hebert landed there, gave him the Medal and decorated about a thousand partisans with the Cross of War earned during recent battles. All of the prominent people of the region and the partisan leader attended the ceremony.

During the first two weeks of September serious battles took place against all of the undergrounds. Obviously the Viet Minh was trying to determine their perimeter in order to set up a serious attack maneuver. The battles were harder and harder. Losses on both sides were heavy. At Muong Lam and at Thuan Chau a roomy cabin was set up as a hospital where the wounded without fractures were treated. Hebert had three Thai nurses at Thuan Chau and two at Muong Lam, each of whom cared for a score of wounded.

On 15 September prisoner interrogations and intelligence provided by the partisans revealed that regular Viet units were crossing the Black River at Ta Khoa and taking up positions in the area of Son La, Na San and Co Noi. Their objective seemed to be Lai Chau. To achieve this they absolutely had to open the pass on RP 41, held by the underground. On 7 October air reconnaissance by Hebert showed that the Son La bridge had been repaired.

For his part Chatel indicated more and more numerous regular Viet units going up the Song Ma Valley. They were heading toward Muong Lam, and took positions in the regions of Ban Da and along the forested banks of the Nam Khon between

Ban Hin Phen and Ban Da. Chatel followed their activity from an observation point situated north of the Song Ma.

After a light parachute drop to Chatel, Hebert parachuted from the Beaver near him to take account of the situation. All of the advanced underground fighter positions had been seriously probed. Hebert requested B-26's to bombard the area, teeming with Viets. On the 19th a Beaver picked him up at Muong Lam and took him to Haiphong to guide the B-26 bombardment. Correct aerial machinegunning took place after contact had been made with Chatel by means of a 300 radio set. On the 21st Chatel went to the bombarded sites. Many blotches of blood and a dozen destroyed weapons left on the field showed that the bombardment had been effective.

But the Viet Minh did not retreat. Reinforcements flowed ceaselessly through the Song Ma Valley. Hebert requested Chatel to tighten his position around the villages of Ban Phuong and Muong Lam, while Schneider reinforced his observation posts and occupied the ridges dominating the villages occupied by Chatel.

On the 15th Hebert requested a B-26 bombardment on the area. Fournier got agreement from Command. In the afternoon of the 27th, Hebert took off from Cat 21 with two B-26's of Captain Petrus. Contact was made by a 300 radio with Chatel and Schneider. The Viets were still on the emplacements spotted the day before. The bombardment commenced immediately. The Viets fled in the direction of the nearby mountains to take shelter from the B-26 machinegunning. But they were met by Schneider's Meos. Many weapons were recovered and, it must be said, a certain number of ears.

On 1 November eight Thais, who had finished the commando training, parachuted at Thuan Chau, and six more at Muong Long, to guarantee reinforcements for the staff, made necessary by the intensity of the on-going battles.

Daily serious engagements took place in the Song Ma Valley southwest of and on RP 41, northwest of the underground fighter lines.

At the beginning of November the 316th Division, practically complete, was ready to attack the underground fighters. It was directed along two principal axes, the Song Ma Valley in the direction of Muong Lam, and RP 41 in the direction of Thuan Chau.

On 3 November numerous elements were observed on RP 41 in the Ban Tham region. On the 4th anti-personnel mines were parachuted to Ansidei at Thuan Chau, along with ammunition. On the same day Muong Lam on the Song Ma was attacked by a 120 mm mortar. Chatel, unable to envisage serious resistance in the valley, had weapons and ammunition parachuted at Pa Lao. He held on the hills dominating Muong Lam until 7 November. The Viets were very numerous in the valley, he said, but they made fine targets!

On 6 November Ansidei underwent two violent attacks two hours apart on RP 41. On the 7th they were able to drop ammunition to him in the Thuan Chau region. But heavy Viet forces, who had gone up the Black River, overran him from the east. The Muong Pheng partisans were forced to take refuge in the mountains west of the Muong Say highway.

The E-26's guided by Hebert and Ansidei undoubtedly did excellent work, but it was not enough to stop the Viet advance. During a parachute drop on the 7th, Hebert made contact with Chatel. Muong Lam was lost. The Viets were continuing their advance in the direction of Ban Phuong. It was not possible to defend the valley against regular army troops with powerful heavy weapons. Chatel suffered heavy losses. He retreated to Schneider's Meos in the direction of Cotonh. Schneider mounted a heavy ambush on the Ban Phuong post at Cotonh, blocking for two days---or until 10 November---a strong Viet attack and allowing Chatel to retreat.

On the same day, 10 November, Ansidei was subjected to mortar fire and endless attacks. The Ban Chieng Phuoc (Thuan Chau), airstrip, bombarded by 120 mm mortars, was unusable. Thuan Chau in turn was bombarded. The inhabitants fled

to the mountains south of RP 41 by the path leading to Pa Lao, along with the partisans who had been established on the hills dominating Muong Pieng. On 13 November Muong Pieng was occupied by the Viets. Ansidei retreated to the mountains with about 30 partisans. He had suffered heavy losses, but so had the Viets. He regrouped the remainder of the partisans on the heights south of Thuan Chau and reported many heavy trucks traveling at night on RP 41. The highway, the objective of the 316th, was open to the Viets from then on. It had cost them a month of heavy combat to achieve this.

On 15 November ammunition was parachuted to Schneider. He was still in the position occupied on the 7th. During the night of the 14th-15th, a Viet unit tried to advance on the road from Ban Phuong to Cotonh. It was ambushed and retreated.

On the 15th a new parachute drop was made to Chatel, who continued his harassment on the Song Ma.

On the 16th Hebert made a parachute drop to Ansidei, including rice for the Thuan Chau people who had taken refuge in the mountains.

On the 17th Hebert flew over Pa Lao, Cotonh and Thuan Chau in a Dakota. Radio contact with a 300 set was established with Chatel and Schneider who were at Pa Lao, and with Ansidei who still held the mountains west of Thuan Chau. All indicated that the Viets were ready to invade the region with large forces.

On the 19th the forces assaulted Dien Bien Phu.

The next day Hebert received the order to put the underground fighters to rest, to have the weapons buried and to wait for the storm to pass. In little groups the Thais returned to their village in the Song Ma Valley. The Meos scattered among the villages of the Plateau. Some refused to bury their weapons and took refuge in caves in the mountains. About a hundred, in groups of 2 or 3, re-joined Hebert at Dien Bien Phu a few days later.

The five noncommissioned officers destroyed their ANGRC 2's and kept only their 300 radios, easier to transport, but audible to the Viets.

In this way we allowed our Colibri, Calamar and Aiglon undergrounds to be crushed. This was exactly what had happened with the Vercours underground and the Plateau des Glières underground in 1944. We had not supported these men. We had left them to their own devices against regular troops of much higher numbers. We had literally condemned them to death.

Hebert flew over the region for several days. On the 21st he learned through Ansidiel that the Viets had taken up positions on the rocky spur immediately north of Thuan Chau.

On the 22nd and the following days Hebert had no more contact with his non-commissioned officers. He was to get information later through two Meos parachuted at the beginning of December into the region which Maljean and Ansidiel had taken in the Thuan Chau area; Chatel and Schneider, instead of heading for Dien Bien Phu as had been requested, had gone further north in the direction of Lai Chau, a region which they knew well.

Arrested, they had been tried in front of a people's court and hanged.

Only Ansidiel and Maljean returned from the Viet camps.

No one ever learned what had become of Pallot.

Third Part: The Liquidation (1954)

Dien Bien Phu Without Underground Fighters

After the evacuation of Na San, the execution of the Navarre plan --step in the Haute Region--was pursued in the Delta.

All of the available forces (8 mobile groups, 2 armored groups, and 2 amphibious groups) were used for these operations, which lasted from 10 September to 15 October.

Up to this date our underground fighters, although under serious attacks, had vigorously resisted the assaults of the 316th. No important position had been lost. The losses suffered were not serious.

I hoped that the Dien Bien Phu operation and the Lai Chau evacuation could be undertaken rapidly as had been anticipated.

Never have I regretted more than at this time not having more braid or stars on my sleeves. In many cases the authority which they confer makes it possible to have some effective weight on the Command intentions. My four stripes bore little weight in the face of the stars of Generals Cogny and Gilles. Instead of benefiting from the presence of our underground, who were blocking the route from Dien Bien Phu and from Lai Thieu, the Mouette operation was undertaken on 15 October. It was directed against the Viet Minh 320th Division based in Than Hoa which, according to intelligence, intended to launch an offensive against the Delta. I followed this operation closely by means of decoded Viet messages which were forwarded to me regularly and which differed tangibly from the official reports. After 20 days of combat, this unit had suffered only relatively small losses. It was seen later, because it participated completely in the siege of Dien Bien Phu.

When, on 20 November the paratroopers of General Gilles jumped on Dien Bien Phu, the RP 41 (Provincial Route 41) and the valley of the Song Ma were relieved. The Dien Bien Phu road and the Lai Chau road were opened to the Viet Minh.

Certainly the Viet Minh battalion which occupied the basin was destroyed despite severe resistance. But on 1 December the advance guard of the 21st DI (Infantry Division) was noted in the vicinity of Lai Chau, which was its objective. Other Viet Minh units were hurrying toward Dien Bien Phu.

The severe combat which our underground fighters had conducted for three months without support, although it would have been possible to give them support, and their sacrifice, like that of our comrades on the Plateau des Glieres, had not done any good.

In war as in life, there are favorable occasions which must be seized for success. Errors which may appear to be unimportant, or which appear only a long time after having been committed, sometimes have such consequences that they can not be repaired no matter what sacrifices or efforts are made later. History abounds in examples of this type. Dien Bien Phu could be added to them.

I am convinced that if the operation Castor¹ had been launched on 15 October, i.e., one month earlier instead of the operation Mouette, when our underground fighters had all of their equipment available, the drama of Dien Bien Phu would have been avoided.

Actually, from the first days of the operation, the plan which General Navarre had seemed to concede to me in July, was no longer applicable: i.e., bring the troops back from Lai Chau to Dien Bien Phu, and evacuate all of the regular units as soon as the airstrip could have been put back into condition. Otherwise it would have been necessary to sacrifice several battalions, which was unthinkable at that time. And even if this sacrifice had been permitted, the departure of the regular troops would have left the Luang Prabang route opened. Actually the underground fighters barring RP 41 and the Song Ma valley had been

¹ Name given to the operation at Dien Bien Phu.

annihilated. Those who could have occupied the north of the basin ("Chomette") had not yet been brought up.

The presence of the entire Viet Minh battle corps in possession of all its materiel and continually reinforced, made it impossible to create the enormous zone of underground fighters on horseback on the Laos and Tonkin frontier, envisaged several months earlier, and which did not present any particular difficulties at that time.

From the beginning of the operation Castor, General Navarre had been obliged to remain at Dien Bien Phu.

The fate of Indochina from here on was bound to that of the entrenched camp. General Navarre no longer had any solution except to make of Dien Bien Phu a super Na Sen, capable of withstanding the assault of the Viet Minh divisions and, as in the preceding year, of breaking them.

General Cogne, approved by General Navarre, thought for a moment of holding Lai Chau and of playing with both Lai Chau and Dien Bien Phu as long as possible. This would be to leave the initial plan without any serious reason. The rapid approach of the 316th forced an immediate evacuation of Lai Chau to Dien Bien Phu.

It began on 8 December. Part of the garrison was evacuated by air, and the remainder and the auxiliary units--notably the border group--by land, covering more than 100 km on poor paths. The column was seriously engaged a number of times. The border group rapidly disbanded. Still, the best members were able to rejoin the underground Cardamone.

"From a single redoubt," wrote General Navarre, "General Cogne hopes to conduct powerful offensive actions intended to slow the establishment of the enemy arrangement."

Actually these actions were limited to patrol and reconnaissance at some distance. The Command rapidly realized that more important activities were not

desirable, because of the troops which they required, when it was necessary to perform significant work to put the camp into a state of defense to oppose an attack which could occur very soon.

In addition, the encounters resulting from these few reconnaissance patrols showed the poor aptitude of these troops for jungle combat.

GMI Strengths and Weaknesses

The explanation I had made at Paris on the development on the GCMA had not aroused any enthusiasm. The Chief of the Action Service, who received all of our reports, therefore had the chance to examine them and formulate criticism. There was a great deal. In October I received 11 pages of directives.

I was reminded that the mission that the GCMA had received on its formation in 1951 was: to create undergrounds, to establish escape routes, and to create sabotage teams.

The creation of the underground fighters in the rear of the Viets in 1951 appeared to be a risk. But it was the only policy able to have a decisive effect on the outcome of the conflict. The experiments made in 1952 had shown that we had practically unlimited possibilities in Laos and in the immense mountainous zone of North Vietnam.

Therefore the General who was Commander-in-Chief intended to use and orient the GCMA as a function of his needs, without worrying about knowing if the special doctrines for the Action Service were respected or not. What was important was to cause the Viet Minh the maximum amount of difficulty, especially in the rear.

It had very quickly become evident, as a matter of fact, that sabotage work performed by small teams, effective in Europe, had no effect on our adversaries, who had established their power on dispersion and flexibility.

The same was true of the escape routes, which were impossible to create in a country where the infrequent paths could be easily controlled for hundreds of kilometers.

The Action Service report criticized at length the use of the resources:

"After a point-by-point study of each of the elements in the field, it has been established: